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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000948

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TAGS: [KDEM](#) [PGOV](#) [KISL](#) [IR](#) [LE](#) [SY](#) [AA](#)
SUBJECT: MGLE01--KATAEB PARTY LEADER SEES NO WAY AROUND
SYRIA, NO WAY TO APPROACH AOUN

BEIRUT 00000948 001.2 OF 003

Classified By: JEFFREY FELTMAN, AMBASSADOR. REASONS SECTION 1.4(B)

SUMMARY

1. (C) Former President and Kataeb (Phalange) party leader Amin Gemayel told the Ambassador that Syria remains the key to resolving the political impasse in Lebanon. Gemayel left the dialogue sessions convinced that the participants had divided into two groups: 1) Hizballah and its apologists (including Michel Aoun), and 2) March 14 and its supporters. The atmosphere in the room was pleasant, but there was no will to compromise across those groups on the presidency or Hizballah's arms. Gemayel said that Syria was the key to solving the presidency issue. He said rumors were circulating of international efforts to reach the Syrians through the U.S., Egypt, Saudi Arabia and Libya. All of these efforts were aimed at convincing Damascus to allow Emile Lahoud to leave office without exacting too high a price from Lebanon. Gemayel warned that the disarmament of Hizballah would be a long, slow process achieved in carefully plotted stages. Hizballah will negotiate hard, Gemayel said. The Shia group is not interested in simple face-saving measures; they want control of their future. Gemayel despaired that Aoun was not clever enough to escape his own wishful thinking concerning Hizballah's support, the Syrian designs on Lebanon, and Aoun's own chances to become president. His own party is in contact with Aoun's Free Patriotic Movement, (FPM) but he could not foresee an alliance with Aoun. Gemayel is working closely with his March 14 allies. He shared with the Ambassador the story of his own recent, surprise visit from Samir Ja'ja'. End summary.

SYRIA STILL THE KEY TO THE PRESIDENCY

2. (C) On March 23, Amin Gemayel met with the Ambassador and PolChief in his Beirut offices at the Kataeb party headquarters. Gemayel appeared anxious as he discussed the recent events at the national dialogue. He said that the dialogue discussions centered on the presidency and Hizballah's weapons. The key to the political situation was Syria. Before discussing disarmament, Hizballah wishes to come to the table to talk about the new national defense strategy in which they would presumably be included. But March 14 is not prepared to accept Hizballah's right to exercise sovereignty over Lebanon's defense options. The process leading to disarmament will be a long one. Hizballah

will want to keep some role in the south. Gemayel and his allies were prepared to offer Hizballah some face-saving measures that allow them to keep a role in the south as part of a nation solution. But Hizballah is not interested in face saving, Gemayel warned. They want real authority in the south. The process would be helped if the Lebanese leadership could agree on a credible president who would be part of the negotiations. The key to the presidency is Syria. The Syrians do not trust the Lebanese. They want assurances before a new President takes office. Gemayel said Syrians greatest fear is an anti-Syrian president and prime minister in Lebanon.

13. (C) Gemayel said that he had heard that Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar and Libya, were all interested in encouraging Syria to solve the Lebanon-Syria relations problem. He thought the Arabs were acting on a perceived shared interest in stability in the region. With this encouragement, the Syrian government must be induced into telling Emile Lahoud to leave office early. The parliamentary majority did not have the votes to dislodge Lahoud. Aoun and Hizballah were not prepared to compromise and vote with Hariri and March 14 to oust the President. It would take word from Damascus to end the political stalemate in Beirut. The problem was finding a way to limit the cost of Syrian cooperation. In Gemayel's analysis, Asad is stronger in Lebanon and more confident at this time than he had been one month earlier. In this mood, the Syrian President would almost certainly attempt to impose a "compromise" presidential candidate on the Lebanese. Gemayel thought Asad, under pressure at home, would have three demands for his cooperation: 1) the Lebanese presidency, 2) relief from western pressure on the regime, 3) economic assistance for Syria. The Ambassador asked if Iran cares as deeply as Syria about the Lebanese presidency. Gemayel said Iran works through Syria in Lebanon, and added that the Iranian Ambassador has asked for a meeting with him recently.

BEIRUT 00000948 002.2 OF 003

THE DIALOGUE IS GOING WELL WITH LIMITATIONS

14. (C) Gemayel was working, during the pause in the dialogue, to close ranks with his March 14 comrades. He had a private dinner with Walid Jumblatt and Marwan Hamade on March 22. He cautioned that the March 14 group must close ranks and find a means of dealing with Syria. Gemayel said that his son, MP Pierre Gemayel, was close to Saad Hariri and was in regular contact with him. Gemayel gave Hariri good grades for his performance at the national dialogue. While saying that Hariri needs experience, Gemayel seemed satisfied that Hariri is not making any major mistakes in his political activities. "When you look at him," Gemayel said, "you think he is his father. But he is not. It is not easy facing these challenges, but he is doing a good job." The Ambassador relayed to Gemayel praise from Samir Ja'ja' for Gemayel's constructive role in the national dialogue. When the Ambassador told the story of Samir Ja'ja's surprise visit to the embassy (SEPTTEL), Gemayel looked amused and asked, "What time was that?" Then he told the Ambassador that he had been surprised at his home at about 19:30 on the same day by the appearance, at his residence, of an unfamiliar bodyguard. His own security staff told him that Samir Ja'ja' had arrived unexpectedly to speak with him. (Note: Ja'ja' appeared at the Embassy first at about 7 p.m. When he discovered the Ambassador was not there, he left, apparently to surprise Gemayel. Ja'ja' several hours later then returned on another unexpected visit to the Embassy, where he met with the Ambassador.) Gemayel speculated that, perhaps, Ja'ja was exercising his still unfamiliar, freedom of movement.

AOUN STRATEGY IS SELF-DEFEATING

15. (C) Gemayel said that his party had created a committee to meet with Aoun's people to discuss common issues. But, responding to the Ambassador's comments that the Aoun group claims him as an ally, he insisted that he is not considering moving into Aoun's camp. "Can you see me allied with Michel Aoun," Gemayel asked incredulously. Michel Aoun will only support Michel Aoun for president, Gemayel said. He described Aoun as a dupe, used by Hizballah and Amal to do their dirty work. Both Shia parties will only submit Syrian-supported candidates for the presidency; they have no room to maneuver. Aoun will be strung along as long as he is useful. Explaining his take on the Syrians, Gemayel said that for Syria the Lebanese presidency is not a question of personalities. It is a balance of power issue. He recalled that the Syrians supported his own presidency despite his anti-Syrian reputation. The Former General is lost in a world of his own imagining, according to Gemayel. Although neither Amal nor Hizballah have announced support for Aoun, he still believes by being close to them, he can gain their support. "Aoun is a Trojan horse" whose presence protects Lahoud's position and shows disunity among Christians. Gemayel recounted a bit of his own history with the Syrians and Aoun. He had spent much of his presidency avoiding Aoun's attempts on his life. In those days, the Syrians lured Aoun into a fight with Samir Ja'ja's Lebanese Forces with the prospect of support for his presidency. Now, Gemayel said, they are using the same bait. Gemayel attributes Aoun's initial popularity among Christians to his positions upon his return to Lebanon. Aoun used the symbolism and language of a forceful Christian leader initially. After his understanding with Hizballah, Gemayel sees Aoun losing popularity among his old supporters.

16. (C) Aoun's tactics are against his own interests, Gemayel said. If the stalemate continues, Lahoud will remain in office for the remainder of his term. Once that term is ended the power of March 14 will have diminished, but the balance in the parliament will be the same. Christian disunity would have created an open field for the presidency and Aoun would have lost his support and momentum among Christians, exhausted and disillusioned at the lack of progress. "By then any election will be a non-event. It would be impossible for Aoun to be elected," Gemayel said. The resulting economic malaise, and apathy would certainly cause the international community to lose interest in Lebanon.

COMMENT

BEIRUT 00000948 003.2 OF 003

17. (C) Gemayel was convincing in his denial of complicity with Aoun. Some people close to Kataeb have been floating the rumor that Gemayel, angered over the potential ascension of Nassib Lahoud as a March 14 presidential candidate, planned to throw his support to Aoun. In light of the rumors of conflict in March 14, Gemayel's dinner with Jumblatt (who is apparently also moving around town more these days) and Hamadeh, as well as his private meeting with Ja'ja', are significant signs of cooperation.

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